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ABSTRACT

A pathological phenomenon repeatedly observed in some families is the most desperate efforts toward the most unpleasable parents made by the most rejected middle-aged children. Counselors working with these families find the daughters compulsively seeking the affection and approval their mothers have historically withheld. The aged and even senile mothers maintain the abandoning behavior pattern while the daughters fruitlessly pursue their appreciation and validation. While the daughters' self-esteem suffers the blows of repeated insult, they resist relinquishing their one-down position as though it were an addiction. Case studies show that the only way of stopping this destructive game is through individual therapy and major change in the daughters' attitude and behavior. It is necessary that the daughters recognize the futility of their efforts, experience the loss of nurturing they never had, grieve as needed, and accept reality. They can be helped to face their terror of being in limbo alone and to free themselves from old injunctions if they are sufficiently motivated to achieve the pay-offs of autonomy with its risks and unknowns. In effect, the daughter and her therapist join in reparenting and setting her free from the strands of doubt and hope and helplessness that bind her. (Author/WAS)

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# IN FUTILE PURSUIT: REJECTING MOTHERS AND THEIR APPROVAL-SEEKING DAUGHTERS

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# IN FUTILE PURSUIT: REJECTING MOTHERS AND THEIR APPROVAL-SEEKING DAUGHTERS

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This paper will explain a pathological phenomenon repeatedly observed in some families the most desperate efforts toward the most unpleasable parents being made by the most rejected middle-aged children. In counseling these families, we find the daughters compulsively seeking the affection and approval their mothers have historically withheld. The aged and even senile mothers maintain the abandoning behavior pattern while the daughters fruitlessly pursue their appreciation and validation. While the daughters' self-esteem suffers the blows of repeated insult, they resist relinquishing their one-down position as though it were an addiction. Our case studies show the only stopping of this destructive game to be through individual therapy and major change in the daughters' attitude and behavior. It is necessary that the daughters recognize the futility of their efforts, experience the loss of nurturing they never had, grieve as needed, and accept reality. They can be helped to face their terror or being in limbo alone and to free themselves from old injunctions if they are sufficiently motivated to achieve the pay-offs of autonomy with risks and unknowns. In effect, the daughter and her therapist join in reparenting and setting free the daughter from the strands of doubt and hope and helplessness that bind her.

ABSTRACT

Nursing home staff members have long been aware that relatives of their patients could become agitated and abusive, often toward nursing personnel. We frequently and by now glibly refer to the children's guilt feelings as explanation for their behavior. Staff social workers in medical facilities fit in as alleviators of family guilt or protectors of nurses in the sense of intervening to drain off the pressure. We have noticed that some families do not permit the pressure to be drained nor the so-called guilt burden to be lifted. Their need for the continued struggle between parent and child and possibly a third party causes suspicion that something beyond guilt feelings is happening.

At the Blumenthal Jewish Home, a 130-bed facility in Clemmons, North Carolina, we have observed several 50-year-old daughters in stranglehold battles with their 80-year-old mothers. Our particular focus of concern and inquiry has been those daughters whose mothers had virtually abandoned caring for them early in the daughter's childhood. Why, we wondered, are the most persistent efforts to please an unpleasable mother coming from an apparently guilt-laden daughter who has had close to 50 years of parental neglect? Why are daughters who received sufficient gratification from their mothers <u>not</u> the ones scrambling and battling, jumping when mother says jump? Why are the "wrong" ones feeling or acting guilty? One would expect to see this close tie operating between people with a basis for closeness, a history of deep mutual investment.

Yet we have cases such as the following. One is a mother-daughter pair on the unit of my colleague, Ginger Morrison, who has worked with me toward understanding this particular type of relationship. The daughter was an only child, left at 13 by her mother, who remarried and acquired 8 step-children whom she raised instead. When mother's husband died and left all his money to his children, the daughter brought mother to live with her, taking over mother's care and support in the daughter's home. She felt <u>responsible</u> for her depressed mother and apparently welcomed the opportunity to prove her caringness.

Currently she visits her mother in the nursing home weekly from several hours away, coming alone and very early in the morning to demonstrate her dedication. She criticizes other families for lacking her eagerness but ignores other people's efforts as though she <u>must</u> be better than they. She cheerleads and wallows in martyrdom simultaneously, showing how exceptional she is. She expresses feelings of misery to her social worker yet embraces her misery, avoiding blaming her mother and denying mother's progress in adjusting. "I need mother to need me so bad that I don't count and my other ties don't count," seems to be her message. Like her mother, her husband is distant and estranged. The daughter says she knows what she needs to do to fix her problems but doesn't do those things. Mother's refrain in demanding her daughter's attention is, "She's only got one mother." She expects to come first with her daughter to compensate for her own misery and

regresses to incontinence after their visits. The daughter is a dramatic martyr, who won't relinquish mother's dependency, though she is tired of playing the heavy, taking responsibility to make things right for her family members.

Another example of such a relationship is a daughter who traveled an hour to visit her mother weekly at the Home, as she had years earlier when mother had an apartment, and continued to feel burdened by her wish to satisfy mother. Even when she added a 20-mile detour to her trip in order to get a certain type of cookies for mother, all she heard was complaints and criticisms. Many years earlier, mother had left the daughter in Germany when she came to this country with a new husband. Yet when the daughter came here and married, she felt responsible for her mother, who was unhappily married and depressed. After the mother was widowed, the daughter went weekly to clean her house and accepted tearfully the accusations that she didn't spend enough time with her mother. Despite an endless round of recriminations no matter what she did, the daughter was considering moving mother into her home for a second miserable try there. To seek relief from her self-imposed pressure, the daughter moved mother to a Home in her own city, where mother burdened her with more frequent demands for attention, blaming the daughter for everything that happened to her. The daughter seemed to believe that she must fix everything so mother would be happy and was very involved in pain, struggle, and anger about her mother despite the achievements reaped in

other areas of her life.

In observing and tangling with the strong ambivalence in these and similar daughters, I was at first perplexed by their resistance to change, their determination to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. The dynamics seemed the same whether or not the daughter ventilated resentments to a social worker. A powerful motivation was running these daughters round a circle they weren't choosing to stop. Some brass ring caused continuation like an addiction. The junkie continues his heroin habit, keeps the monkey on his back; what's hard is quitting. There's some loss incurred in giving up this struggle.

The conclusion I came to after encountering several of these persistent martyrs is that the daughters' efforts are intended to make the mothers who abandoned them come around and provide caring. They are still fighting abandonment, hungry for acceptance specifically from the rejecting mothers. It is as though they cannot lead their lives satisfactorily without finally getting the withheld stamp of approval, as though their underlying fear is of non-existence or oblivion without validation. The merry-go-round we see is daughter's horse chasing mother's without getting any closer and all the while daughter feeling worse, accumulating more rejection and resentment.

The process leading to these circular dynamics starts early in the

child's life. As she reaps rejection rather than validation, the child incorporates a poor self-image. She is too young to see her mother as faulty. If mother indicates that the child is bad, the child believes it. Mother is perceived as omnipotent and right. Thus the child's view of self as worthless when she hasn't succeeded in pleasing mother. She is in childhood literally dependent on mother for survival.

Later the dependency is composed of unmet emotional need and unresolved separation. The daughter attempts to remain symbiotically attached to mother, placating her as earlier to repair the damage, though this is not the way to fix it. Inside, the daughter is feeling like a nothing both because her desire for love is not being met and because she chooses not to separate. She grants an unnecessary power to her mother, becoming especially frantic at the final nursing home stage of mother's life when the daughter's terror is that mother will die without having given her love and approval. Thus we see scrambling to meet all possible care needs mother might have in the institution and flare-ups at staff who doubt the need for such mutual dependency. To the daughter, the efficacy of catering to the demanding, narcissistic mother's requests will be proven in her mother's final granting of the wish to be cared for. The daughter has not accepted the fact that mother never will wave the wand of approval even if she lives forever. Nor has she confronted her terror of separation and total abandonment, rooted in the belief that she cannot survive alone.

It's as though mother were dangling a carrot before her, coyly promising acceptance.

We find these daughters neglecting other areas of their responsibility as they try to change their mother's neglect of them. They collude with their mothers in their own belittlement - and belittling is a major weapon the mothers use to engage the daughters in meeting their narcissistic needs - and face the results of mother's seeing them as worthless. Halpern points out in Cutting Loose that the mother disdains such a placating child and expresses contempt in double messages showing the daughter's inadequacy. Old age and impending death tighten mother's hold. Both are facing separation anxiety and clutching at each other. Fusion is an unconscious escape, though if it were achieved it would not be a haven. Neither feels safe with or without the other. No wonder these clients experience and cause more than the usual amount of turmoil during placement. The daughters are near panic. Their underlying rage at mother causes additional fear - responsibility for mother's death due to the death wish the daughter dares not admit. The compulsive efforts and symbiosis are prolonged by not accepting her own anger, which hasn't really the power to kill mother as in infantile fantasy.

So when the daughter bleats at us, at times with desperate anger, "I couldn't possibly say that to my mother!", we hear the daughter's fear of losing her mother, not the mother's inability

to tolerate or survive honesty and separation. What the daughter needs to accomplish, if she is ever to get the monkey off her back, is her own walking away from her mother. The merry-go-round does not stop of its own accord; the addicting substance does not leave the marketplace; the daughter does not magically tap something in mother that brings love raining down protectingly. Since nothing convinces her more of failure than the self-defeating losses of confidence incurred by courting mother's disapproval, the desirable alternative is perceiving that mother is an impossible nut to crack. The defect in the daughters is their willingness to be "eternal victims, repetitiously falling into masochistic relationships." (Friday, p. 238) They need to face the fact that it is and always was too late to get the love they seek from the defective mother, that any further pursuit of it is a waste of more time.

The daughter who is willing to give up what is futile and aim for autonomy can use the therapist's help. While letting go of the hope or earning mother's caring, the daughter can take nurturing, support, and validation from her therapist. In order to grow up, she must confront her fear of aloneness and learn her own power. The therapist provides some reparenting, expressing appreciation of who the daughter is, recognizing her assets, and inviting her to navigate for herself. The daughter works toward seeing herself as her own protector, becoming in a sense her own mother via the messages to herself that she incorporates from her therapist.

In order that she not be overwhelmed by despair from losing the dependent fantasy, the daughter needs to spend time and energy grieving about the loss with the therapist's comfort and encouragement to seek better treatment from people. The daughter puts to rest the terror that, without mother, she will be "adrift in a cold and uncaring universe" (Halpern, p.246) - abandoned and helpless. Facing the unknown independently rests on building some foundation through practice of self-confidence about survival. The daughter is relieved by not depending on mother's approval; she can face the unpredictable with optimism because taking good care of herself is a newly-learned behavior that works. Accepting aloneness is accompanied by a sense of becoming herself. She learns additionally to seek support and love from people who are willing to give to her rather than to engage in repetition compulsion, the endless recreating of the futile pursuit type of relationship. She practices until it feels normal to receive positive strokes rather than belittlement, the therapist serving as guide in the journey of new creation. This means that the therapist will confront the daughter about inviting others to exploit her, about the underlying belief that her own needs are unimportant. As Heffner says in Mothering, staying in charge "means developing the ability to tolerate both the internal anxiety and the external hostility that are generated when one tries to stay in charge." (p. 130) She learns to trust and rely on her own feelings and judgments. The change is in respecting her

own opinion rather than her mother's and therefore not martyring herself again but expecting reciprocity in relationships. The pay-off for "severing the vestigial ties that leash you to the past" (Halpern, p. 254) is the joy of freedom.

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